

[The Truth about the Re-authorized Higher Education Opportunity Act](#)

Since July 2008, when the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) published an article entitled “[New Systems Keep a Close Eye on Online Students at Home](#),” the FUD (Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt) appears to grow each passing day relative to the interpretations/misinterpretations of identification requirements for students participating in online courses of instruction. Participants in innumerable LISTSERVs, eLearning Discussion Boards, and Online Professional Communities, all seem to be struggling with the opening paragraphs of the Chronicle’s article:

“Tucked away in a 1,200-page bill now in Congress is a small paragraph that could lead distance-education institutions to require spy cameras in their students’ homes.

It sounds Orwellian, but the paragraph — part of legislation renewing the Higher Education Act — is all but assured of becoming law by the fall. No one in Congress objects to it.

The paragraph is actually about clamping down on cheating. It says that an institution that offers an online program must prove that an enrolled student is the same person who does the work.”

To compound the issue, those in the media reporting on the re-authorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act have wasted no time rolling out the opinions of “experts.” Opinions such as:

“This is taking a step into a student’s private life,” - Colorado-based Distance Education Executive

“It’s going to reduce access,” “It’s going to increase costs.” - Albany, NY-based College President

“We’re feeling a little picked on,” - Texas-based College Executive

What has happened is that many of those at all levels of the Distance Education profession are under the impression that any student taking a test or quiz online must now do so either in a human-, or technology-proctored environment. Users of nearly every Learning Management System now appear to be struggling with how exactly they will go about providing such proctoring or if it is even possible and 100% reliable.

And you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free (John 8:32)

The Higher Education Opportunity Act **does not** require an institution to verify the identity of a student taking a quiz or test online. It requires that agencies that provide accreditation ensure the institutions they accredit have methods in place to verify the identity of students who enroll or participate in an online course of instruction. Further, the Act requires that those accrediting agencies establish such procedures on 14 August, 2008, and that institutions have until their next accreditation to provide proof they are verifying the identity of its online students (Wrona, 2008). The Higher Education Opportunity Act specifically reads:

“The agency or association [i.e., the accreditor] requires an institution [i.e., a college] that offers distance education or correspondence education to have processes through which the institution establishes that the student who registers in a distance education or correspondence education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the program and receives the academic credit” (H.R. 4137: Higher Education Opportunity Act).

Further, the Higher Education Opportunity Act Conference Report states:

“The Conferees adopt the provision as proposed by both the Senate and the House. The Conferees expect institutions that offer distance education to have security mechanisms in place, such as **identification numbers or other pass code information** required to be used each time the student participates in class time or coursework on-line.”

“The Conferees do not intend that institutions use or rely on any technology that interferes with the privacy of the student and expect that students’ privacy will be protected with whichever method the institutions choose to utilize” (Levine, 2008).

So the truth of the matter is that **all that is required is that an online student have a Student ID and Password** to be used each time they access and participate in an online course! Is there even a Learning Management System that doesn’t consider this a fundamental requirement? Further, the provisions of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) already require such security measures in the protection of a student’s privacy.

While some institutions have gone to great and extraordinary lengths in the implementation of biometric or visual monitoring devices for its online students, and received plenty of media visibility as a result, suffice it to say that it is only a matter of time before the “tech-savvy” student community finds ways around the system. Perhaps all one need to do is watch a couple episodes of “NCIS” or “CSI: Las Vegas” and the solutions will be handed to them.

Those most concerned with the misinformation that abounds regarding the authentication of online students, seem to also address their concerns in context with their online quizzes and tests despite the fact that such assessment methods evaluate nothing more than a student’s ability to memorize. Such assessments do nothing to promote or evaluate conceptual or deep understanding of the topic.

Perhaps those pontifications should wait for another posting...

References

Levine, A. (2008, October 27). Authenticating Students in Online Programs. Retrieved November 23, 2008, from New media Consortium Web site:
<http://www.nmc.org/nmctab/authenticating-students>

Wrona, S. L. (2008, October 15). Identity Verification for Distance-Ed Students: FUD Lingers. Retrieved November 23, 2008, from EDUCAUSE Web site:
<http://connect.educause.edu/blog/swrona/identityverificationfordi/47462>

H.R. 4137: Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008, August 14). Retrieved November 23, 2008, from GovTrack.com web site: <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h110-4137>